

Lifting the EU Arms Embargo on China: Symbols and Strategy*

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Abstract

From October 2003 to March 2005, the prospect of lifting the European Union's (EU) arms embargo on China grew into a diplomatic crisis, and the focus of an intense bargaining between China, the EU, the EU member states, the U.S., Taiwan and Japan. However, the 1989 arms embargo is a non-legally binding political declaration that never fully prevented the selling of European military equipment to China. Furthermore, it is neither the only, nor the principal, mechanism governing EU member states' technological and military related exports to China. Why do some actors so badly want to have it lifted, while others insist that the EU should maintain it at all costs? The paper argues that the international crisis triggered by lifting the arms embargo was the product of a combination of symbolic

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and strategic dynamics. Employing a conceptual framework inspired by the work of Barry O'Neill on the symbolic dimensions of international politics, this paper distinguishes between message symbols and focal symbols. By lifting the arms embargo, EU leaders wanted to send a symbolic message exclusively to China, but the form that they used—lifting the arms embargo—created an unwanted focal symbol that reached a wider audience: Europeans will sell arms to China. EU leaders did not foresee this transformation of their symbolic message to China and, for the most part, had not meant to create that focal symbol.

Key Words: Arms embargo, People's Republic of China, European Union, Strategy, Symbols